

VZCZCXRO2194
PP RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHCI #0145 1331833
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 121833Z MAY 08
FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1991
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE USD FAS WASHINGTON DC
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC
RUEHPH/CDC ATLANTA GA
RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2432

UNCLAS KOLKATA 000145

SIPDIS

DEPT PLS PASS TO HHS, APHIS, AND CDC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [EAGR](#) [SENV](#) [AMED](#) [CASC](#) [IN](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA FOUND IN WEST BENGAL'S DARJEELING DISTRICT

REF: KOLKATA 136

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On May 9, the avian influenza (AI) virus spread to West Bengal's Darjeeling district, bringing the total number of districts affected in West Bengal to 18 out of 19. The spread of H5N1 outside of the normal migratory season suggests that the virus may be embedded in West Bengal's domestic poultry population. The state Animal Resources Development Department Minister indicated that the virus is going to persist in the state and blamed backyard poultry operations for the ineffective culling and the virus' recurrence. The newly affected villages are very close to the India-Nepal international border, and there is understandable concern about the virus spreading into Nepal. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On May 9, the presence of H5N1 virus was confirmed at Painikumari village in West Bengal's Darjeeling district, about 430 miles north of Kolkata. Alarmed by poultry mortality over the past seven days, on May 8, the West Bengal Animal Resources Development (ARD) Department sent samples for testing at HSADL, Bhopal, which confirmed the presence of the virus. Darjeeling's district administrators told media that on May 10, 20 Rapid Response Teams (RRT) started culling and surveillance operations in 28 villages that fall within a three-mile radius of Painikumari village. Culling and sanitization are expected to be complete by May 13. There are no large farms in the area and raising poultry is entirely through small, backyard operations.

3 (U) Painikumari village is located near the India-Nepal international border. The narrow "chicken's neck" strip of West Bengal between Nepal and Bangladesh is only 22km wide. The ARD department has deployed a team from Kolkata that will monitor cross-border poultry traffic to ensure that no poultry enters Nepal from the infected zone, though it is unlikely to be effective, as the borders are essentially open. Post has learned that on May 12, a Nepalese delegation met senior ARD officials in Kolkata. ARD officials also told Post that a team of GOI observers has reached Painikumari to monitor the situation. Contacts in the city of Siliguri, which is close to Darjeeling, told Post that awareness about H5N1 infection is generally low amongst the local people.

4 (U) With Darjeeling joining the state's AI-infected areas, the number of districts affected by the virus this year has risen to 18 (out of 19 administrative districts). Since January 2008 all West Bengal districts with the exception of Kolkata have now reported H5N1 outbreaks, although the pattern of infection in West Bengal did not follow a specific route between contiguous districts. Some districts like Murshidabad and Nadia also reported outbreaks more than once.

¶5. (U) COMMENT: New outbreaks occurring the avian migratory season suggest that the H5N1 virus may have become embedded in

the poultry population of West Bengal. Local media quoted West Bengal ARD Minister Anisur Rahaman as saying that sporadic H5N1 outbreaks are here to stay. Rahaman said that the prevalence of backyard poultry has made culling and decontamination ineffective, leaving behind a residual viral load in sanitized areas. The argument for a regional or international mechanism to fight the H5N1 outbreak will gain momentum if the virus spreads to Nepal, which is likely given the porosity of the Indo-Nepal border, particularly in the Darjeeling district.

JARDINE